Surf tribal behaviour: a sports marketing application

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate “tribal” consumption behaviour and its relationship to branding, in the particular context of the surfing community in Portugal.

Design/methodology/approach – Two focus group meetings with “surfers” and “fans” respectively, in April 2005, were conducted by computerised projective techniques and program-assisted design (PAD) technology, backed by high quality video prompts. Qualitative data analysis was enhanced by quantified data collected in the PAD phase. The design was expressly directed at future quantification and model building.

Findings – Four research propositions, derived from an extensive literature review, were mostly confirmed; surfing does exhibit characteristics of a cult. There are three distinct types of consumer, their associative behaviour characterised by affiliation, social recognition, socialisation and symbolism. Surfers and fans exhibit strong brand awareness and less strong preferences for surf-related brands, in different ways.

Research limitations/implications – Interpretation is limited by the scope of the study: two focus groups in one country. There is some compensation in the richness of the data.

Practical implications – Marketers involved with cult consumers and tribal brands need a body of knowledge on which to base their marketing intelligence-gathering and strategic planning.

Originality/value – This paper provides exploratory research findings related to one classic example of the tribal brand-consumption behaviour that accounts for significant consumer spending around the postmodern world.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Marketing intelligence, Brands, Portugal, Aquatic sports

Paper type Research paper

Context of the study
Sport has always constituted an essential component of leisure-time activity in contemporary societies. The majority of Europeans play some form of sport, while TV broadcasting and live events attract millions of supporters each year.

Surfing is a sport and a recreational activity, with strong lifestyle associations. It is generally accepted that Polynesians from Tahiti and Hawaii were the first to enjoy the sensation of gliding across the face of the ocean. This most popular of so-called “radical sports” is also known as “the king of sports” because legend proclaims that, in Polynesia, only the kings could catch the wave standing.
The total interaction with the sea and the sun, and the art of dominating nature, have helped to win thousands of fans, who form an effective “tribe” of performers and followers worldwide.

In consumer behaviour research, a new tradition has been emerging around the concept of “brand communities” and a “tribal” analysis of the ways in which members of such communities relate to others and, in particular, to the brands associated with the activity that is the focus of their communal behavior. The notion of tribal consumption has crystallised around the research and writings of Bernard Cova, Professor of Marketing at Emormed Marseille and the Università Bocconi in Milan (Cova, 1997). It is clearly linked with the concept of postmodernism in marketing (Brown, 1995, 1999; Cova, 1997, 1999, 2002; Elliot, 1998; Frist, 1996; Frist and Schultz, 1997).

In the recent development of marketing theory, the postmodernist frame of reference has significantly challenged such well-known conventions as the concept of brand image, and has reinforced the notion of the brand as a cult (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2000; McAlexander et al., 2002; Maffesoli and Foulkes, 1998). In its application to organizational marketing, it has signalled the necessity of understanding new social organizations with consumption behavior patterns distinctly different from the traditional norm. The new “consumer tribes” are often characterized by rituals, beliefs, and symbolism that clearly configure a non-religious cult (Atkin, 2004; Brody, 1979).

Against this background, a key aim of this research-based study is to identify within the surfing community the tribal behaviours that are expressed in terms of cognitive, attitudinal and buying responses towards brands associated in some way with their communal activity. It further seeks to discover whether or not the relationships members establish with these brands vary with the nature and level of their involvement in the sport.

Cults in sport
Why do people join cults? Why do they become devoted to certain brands? The simplest answer is that membership tends to make them feel at ease by being among like-minded others. Thus, one of the most important characteristics of cults and cult brands is that they establish the differences that link their users (Atkin, 2004).

Superficially, it would seem that there is little if any relationship between sport and cults, the latter being normally associated with religion. Preblish (1993) observes that sport is a competitive, dynamic, and sometimes individualistic activity, while religion is a non-competitive process founded upon community of social organization. However, it is evident that both sport and religion deploy intricate rituals to place events in a traditional and orderly perspective. Novak (1996) boldly asserts that:

Sport is, somehow, a religion... sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limit. The athlete may of course be pagan, but sports are, as it were, natural religions.

Sports in general have appropriated significant religious terminology as a means of expressing their sincerity, fervour, and seriousness. If they can thereby deliver an experience of the ultimate kind to their adherents, expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and a space deemed sacred, then it is both proper and necessary to call sport itself a religion (Preblish, 1984).
Brodie (1979) places the analytic emphasis on symbols, but agrees that the collective behaviour of followers of organized sports is at least quasi-religious in nature. Percy and Taylor (1980) analysed the dynamics of tribalism and popular notions of masculinity, heroes and the like, in the context of football (soccer) in the UK. They noted that supporters of teams establish rituals involving such “meaningful artefacts” as the clothing they wear, the food they eat and the friends they choose, which become “sacred” through their involvement in the ritual and association with the sport.

“Fandom”

“Fans” a description that is of course, short for “fanatics” and thus again invokes religion, are the very essence of demand for a game or sporting contest (Borland and Macdonald, 2002). The term “fandom” has been coined to describe the social structure that allows individuals to be a part of the sport without participating in the game (Crosson et al., 1991; King, 2000; Richardson, 2004). The phenomenon offers such social benefits as feelings of camaraderie, community and solidarity, as well as enhanced social prestige and self-esteem (Zillman et al., 1989). Kimble and Cooper (1992) argue that fans attain a feeling of vicarious achievement simply by being fans. Hirt et al. (1992) found that their mood and self-esteem were strongly affected by the outcome of an event they were supporting, even when an unrelated task was performed immediately afterwards.

In a meta-study of the literature related to followers and fans, Funk and James (2001) developed a psychological continuum model of the psychological associations that individuals form with sports teams, a sport in general, or both.

Followers of a sport need not necessarily be fans. Jones (1997) suggests that spectators generally observe a sport and then forget about it, while fans are more intense and devote part of every day to the sport. Fandom has also been defined as an affiliation in which a great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from group membership (Hirt et al., 1992). The difference between a fan and a follower seems to depend on the degree of passion. Anderson (1979) describes a fan as an “ardent devotee” frequently possessed by an “excessive enthusiasm” for a particular sport.

Many researchers have suggested different typologies of fans, recognizing a particular behaviour in each subgroup. Hunt et al. (1998) suggest five different types ranging from “fanatical” to “temporary” the latter limiting their fandom to a certain moment or event. Their typology also defines “local” and “dysfunctional” varieties. Topp and Clowes (2002) distinguish among fans, popular supporters and casual supporters; Stewart and Smith (1997) discuss such descriptions as aficionado, theatregoer, passionate partisan, crowd follower and “exclusive partner”. Whatever the names given, one of the most frequently used criteria for understanding these distinct fandom levels is the concept of commitment.

Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) describe “devoted fans” who are affectively committed to the sport, engage proactively in sustained behaviour, and can be expected to continue following the sport under any circumstances.

Wann and Pierce (2003) propose that, because the reactions of sport fans are so often a function of their level of commitment and identification with the sport, the accurate measurement of identification/commitment (UC) is of utmost importance to sports psychologists and sports marketers.
Affiliation

Affiliation with a group is motivated by a desire for positive distinctiveness from other social groups (Madrigal, 2002). One important aspect of the group identification and affiliation process is the performance of such rituals as collecting (souvenirs), dressing (club uniforms) and pilgrimages (travelling to away games), and in general treating the team or sport as a part of one's own identity.

Individuals derive strength and a sense of identity from their connections to social groups. Tajfel (1982) argues that they are unable to form self-images in the absence of group affiliations. Stronger identification leads one to attribute desirable group characteristics to oneself, and assume a greater similarity with other group members (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). Fans who identify strongly with a team or sport are likely to ascribe positive attributes to “their” group and negative attributes to the implicit out-group (Pirontel and Reynolds, 2004). The antecedents of identification and affiliation in a sports context were found by Donavan et al. (2005) to be the basic personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, need for arousal, and materialism.

The mechanism of “role adoption” is a constituent of identity reinforcement and social recognition, and is particularly relevant in the context of any activity that is intensely associated with aspirational life styles. In the particular case of surfing, not normally a team sport with “fans” in the usual sense of the word, even non-practising followers of the associated beach lifestyle like to pretend to be real surfers by wearing the sort of clothing they wear, and thereby take on a definite role in the whole system.

Because sport takes place unequivocally within the context of a society’s significant symbols, it has a direct impact on participant self-perception, self-esteem, and self-worth. In other words, it has a vital social dimension, ideally combining self-recognition with social recognition. Individuals strive to maintain or enhance a positive social identity by affiliating themselves with attractive social groups (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). After being categorized as a group member, individuals achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their own group from others, with respect to some valued dimension (Tajfel and Turner, 1990). They are willingly socialized.

Socialization is in essence a learning process, a deliberate act of identity construction. Along with genes, the socialization process shapes human personality in particular ways by encouraging specific beliefs and attitudes as well as selectively providing experiences. The propensity of individuals to adapt their behaviour in order to render them more socially acceptable is often described as “self-monitoring”.

Neophyte members of an in-group begin to socialize themselves by adopting the mannerisms, attitudes, styles of dress, speech, and behaviour perceived to be characteristic of established members. Such perceptions are frequently stereotypical (Donnelly and Young, 1988). In adopting the stereotypes, a sports fan acquires a kind of “cultural capital” (Richardson, 2004) from the group's knowledge of how to consume the sport as a product, and do so in the socially endorsed way. This process has its roots in childhood socialization, primarily in the context of friends and family. Jaccobson (2003) notes that boys are traditionally socialized into sports at an early age through both parental influence, publicity, sports promotion and brand marketing.

Cult symbolism is intrinsic in fan groups. Objects become symbolic when individuals focus on meanings beyond their tangible, physical characteristics. Thus, products and brands become social tools, serving as a means of communication
between individuals and their “significant references” (Banister and Hogg, 2004). Consumption emerges as the linking values surrounding a common passion. In the context of surfing, the real lines are not only places and beaches they like to go to, the boards, the “secret” gestures and so forth, but also the brands surfers buy. More than just a sport, surfing is a way of life that has a great deal of influence on the fashion world, music and brands.

Consumer tribes
It is in the context of a postmodern society with no social and professional groups, categories or classes that a network of societal micro-groups emerges, in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common sub-culture and a vision of life. One subset is the “consumer tribe” (Cova, 1997). The description is meant to evoke the re-emergence of quasi-aristocratic values: identification with a location, religiousness and group narcissism. From a postmodernist perspective, neo-tribes no longer fit into the predefined categories that might their behaviour predictable (Cova, 1997).

Tribe members tend to exhibit the orientations and characteristics of postmodern consumption, which a study by Firtat and Schultz (1997) has shown to exhibit substantive differences compared with merely modern consumption, such as the consumers’ tendency to assume different identities, their readiness to accept value systems and principles quite distinct from their own, and a lesser regard for material values and the primacy of subject over object.

Modern tribes are a focus for postmodern consumer research and an alternative way of targeting marketing action. Their social behaviour is characterised by what specialist researchers have called “sacralisation” a process which “serves as a transition to move fans to a stronger form of commitment [via] quintessence, inheritance, external sanction, collecting, gift giving, pilgrimage and ritual” (Pinetel and Reynolds, 2004). Tribal consumers are believed to value goods and services which permit and support social interaction of the communal type (Cova and Cova, 2002).

A tribe member becomes “an illusion consumer . . . buys images not products” (Elliot, 1999). This trend in consumption may manifest itself in rejection of a virtual satisfaction through purchasing or may seek direct satisfaction through emotion shared with others, not by consuming with them but simply by being with them (Cova, 1997).

Postmodern consumer behaviour researchers argue that image is a selling entity which the product tries to represent. The image does not represent the product, but vice-versa (Cova, 1999); objectivity gives way to symbolization (Venkatesh et al., 1993). Symbols and signs are constantly reconfigured by “bricolage” fit each specific situation. Thus, in a sense, consumption becomes production (Christensen et al., 2005) and brand loyalty exists only as long as brands project attractive images for consumers’ momentary experiences (Thompson, 1997).

The expressive, rather than rational, nature of these neo-tribes was highlighted in a study by Maffesoli (1996), who argues that ‘identities are formed by the practices arising from the elective and affective ties of tribe members. McGee-Cooper (2005) suggests that the impulse to join others is universal and natural because we want to belong. Individuals can belong to more than one neo-tribe, each conveying visible and invisible signs with which members identify and offering locations and moments in time at which members can come together for the cult rituals that are part of that
collective imagery. In a tribe totally devoted to its passion, such as a subculture of “devoted” fans, members are ready to make sacrifices (Radoš and Cova, 2003).

When manufacturers of potential tribal icons or cult items become involved in the equation, they risk losing control over their brand, as it is, in a sense, expropriated by group members. The main problem usually encountered with tribal brands is the fact that their consumption constitutes a force somewhat in opposition to the brand owner.

**Tribal brands**

Branded goods are often a major part of the system of identification; consuming them becomes part of the affiliation process. A brand stands above a mere “product”. Its value resides in the capacity to achieve an exclusive significance in the mind of potential consumers. Brand image is developed by individuals from the identity signals given out by the physical characteristics of the product or service itself and the messages conveyed via the marketing mix. Kapferer (1998) defines the consumer as “receptor” of the brand identity, who engages in mental elaboration to adopt the perceived brand as a self-image. A brand is thus a sort of identification model. It identifies the tribe, and its members.

Moreover, brands are value systems in themselves. Sheth (1991) proposes that we select brands in order to satisfy specific values. Choosing one over another in the same category establishes a correspondence between brand personality and the persona we aspire to project to others. As Aaker (1996) points out, brand personality guides brand communication, and adds value to the brand. Brands thereby add value to their adherents as well.

Some brands further establish a kind of relationship with consumers, in continuously signalling the kind of person that they are. Beyond functionality, brands can have a symbolic value that allows us to project an image. In this sense, it is publicity and advertising that we drink, wear and drive advertising and publicity, not a beer, a pair of sunglasses or a car. For these reasons, brands play a vital role in the construction of “brand communities” Muniz and O’Guinn (2000), which they distinguish from tribes as being normally less ephemeral, less geographically limited, and more explicitly commercial. They also identify three major components of brand community: a shared consciousness, rituals and a sense of responsibility which may lead their existing members to recruit new members. In the same vein, Muniz and Schau (2005) agree that rituals, traditions and behavioral expectations characterize brand communities.

McAlexander et al. (2002) concur with Muniz and O’Guinn in defining a brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand” but expand the concept to include relationships between customers and the product, the company and even among one another. They stress that these communities have been observed to share meaningful consumption experiences. Members of a brand community may even participate with manufacturers in “co-creation” of brands that support the community (Rowley et al., 2007).

Belk and Turman (2005) introduce the notion of “brand cult” to describe extreme brand-focused devotion, specifying the contrast with the identification that sport fans usually feel about their club, or their sense of community within a sport. The main
difference is that the brand dominates the personalities of the group members, whereas in fandom, the game and the are typically more important than the club merchandise.

Besides, the similarities that may exist between tribal relationships among neo-tribe members and members of brand communities, the fact is that both are symbolically constructed and based on a system of values, norms and codes – mental constructs that allow group members to formulate their own meanings. Consumers perceive brands as a promise for a specific experience that, when socially shared with others, leads to the formation of a community and a shared sense of identity. This link may or not lead to a shared acceptance and consumption of other brands linked to the major brand.

Fisher (1998) reported a study examining the impact on sports fans’ identification with a team and their brand consumption choices of variables more usually encountered in studies of advertising effect: similarity and attractiveness. Kwon and Armstrong (2002) examined the role of impulse in buying sport-related merchandise and its effect on the same of money spent.

Thus, one of the ways of expressing the “we-ness” of a community is through consumption. It seems reasonable, in that case, to investigate the extent to which passion for a sport or team transfers to these linked brands in the form of tribal recognition, acceptance, preference and loyalty. The question is: will the fans understand that these supporting and sponsor brands are emotionally linked to the sport, or are they seen as intrusive and opportunistic freeloaders?

In the specific case of the worldwide surfing community, few brands that are strongly linked to the sport. They are mostly manufacturers of the equipment, boards and suits, which makes their use by surfers almost mandatory. There are also brands that sponsor surf competitions and surfers – not necessarily sports brands – and others that use the images and symbols of surfing universe in their creative strategies to harness the zeitgeist of sea, sun and surf rather than because of any direct connection with the sport or the community.

The matter of gender
No more than a footnote in the literature of sport is the undoubtedly association with gender identity, perhaps reflecting the uncertainty of the male in modern society in general and of the mainly male authors in particular. The favoured sport in any society – dominantly football across the globe except for the USA – is inevitably determined by masculine preferences, and following sport can be perceived as a male retreat and a realm of masculinity (Klein, 1999). Wann and Waddill (2003) examine the usefulness of anatomical sex, masculinity, and femininity in predicting fan motivation. As expected, masculinity is the most powerful predictor, except at the family level, when femininity accounted for the greatest proportion of observed variance.

Conceptual model
The main purpose of the study described here was to identify the existence of tribal behaviour in the surfing community, and the impact of that tribanism on the relationship between its members and brands associated with surfing. The focus is on the brand, rather than the individuals or the activity.

It was concluded from the literature review that consumer behaviour in the surfing community is significantly influenced by the aspects of cult that characterize the way
surfers approach their sport as a way of living. The nature of the associated “fandom” may determine the strength of the link between members of the associated brand community and brands which are part of the surfing universe at various levels of involvement with the sport itself.

The surfing community comprises not only surfers themselves but also a group of followers of the surfing cult, who may have little or no experience of being on a surfboard. Academic studies of conventional team sports have defined such non-playing members of a club’s own community as “fans” (Harvey, 2001; Morgan, 2005). This description invokes the religious parallels discussed earlier and may have connotations that are too ideological to describe the relationship between surfers and those who watch them surfing. An analogy might be with grand prix motor racing or show jumping, in the sense that an “audience” of “spectators” often expresses its identification with the “competitors” through clothing and manners. Alternatively, one might think of the “followers” of football teams who literally follow the team around the country and abroad to all its matches, versus the self-proclaimed “supporters” who may seldom attend love games but will profess utter loyalty to one professional club.

None of those terms is any more applicable to the surfing context than “sympathisers” however. Therefore, the simple description “fans” will be used in the rest of this paper. It was tempting to specify that they are “surf fans” or “surfing fans” but both of those descriptions risk the implication that they do surf, at least periodically, whereas the point is that one can be a fan of surfing without being even an occasional surfer, simply by identifying with the “performers” on the surfing stage.

It is worth noting that, however limited the first-hand contact that those fans have with the surf, they will diligently follow the surfing community to the beaches and be there at the right times. In short, they are dedicated followers. The question is, do surfers and surfing relate in the same way or differently to surfing brands, with their equally loose connection to the activity itself?

Figure 1 shows a conceptual model linking the concepts of cults, tribes, fandom, brand communities and cult brands.

The first components of the model are the concepts of the cult and “fandom”. The fandom experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals, requiring a symbolic language and a space deemed sacred by its worshipers – tantamount to a religion, according to Prebish (1984). Percy and Taylor (1991) also use the religious metaphor, especially the implicit relationship between rituals, performance and crowd expectations. Atkin (2004) proposes that cult brands need to “telegraph” their differences, while Brody (1979) argues that both players and supporters symbolize something.

Our first research proposition is thus:

RPI. Surfing is an activity which exhibits many of the manifestations of a religious cult.

The second level of the conceptual model incorporates demographic profiles and levels of commitment. The customary socio-demographic variables have been found to influence the “consumption” of sport (Armstrong and Peretto Stratta, 2004). In particular, it is a distinctly male realm (Klein, 1990), and masculinity is thought to be the most powerful predictor of the motivation to play sports (Wann and Waddill, 2003).
Boys are traditionally socialized into sports by their parents and the marketers at an early age (Jacobson, 2003).

Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) suggest that the ultimate fans are those who are truly committed to the sport. To acknowledge the transcendent nature of their commitment, the authors use the description “devoted”. Thorne and Bruner (2006) note that some fans are indeed fanatical, but Gardner (1997) remarks that “one man’s religion is another man’s fanaticism”. In short, not all fans participate with the same level of intensity, intentionally or subconsciously.

Studies reviewed earlier have classified sports fans into typologies Hunt et al. (1999); Tapp and Clowes (2002); Stewart and Smith (1997), but all have an underlying trait in common: varying degrees of passion and commitment, in this case to surfing, which share their social behaviour. Accordingly, our second research proposition is:

*RP2.* Fans’ distinctive behavioural patterns vary with the level of their commitment to the sport.
The third component of this research model deals with social affiliation. Fans are recognised, and recognise themselves, as members of a group within the social environment (Ashforth and Macl, 1999), labelled as having values that are coherent with those of others with whom they identify. According to Madrigal (2002), group affiliation is motivated by the desire not only to belong but also to be distinct from other social groups. Jacobson (2003) argues that the motive for affiliating is that the group provides its members with a sense of community.

The process is thus a form of socialization, located at the fourth level of the model, which Richardson (2004) describes as the securing of “cultural capital”. The same author further remarks that fans who have a higher level of identification with the group display a far greater propensity for self-serving bias than those less strongly affiliated. The most committed fans also have higher expectations (Madrigal, 2002) and stronger emotional reactions to events.

Cult symbolism is an inherent characteristic of fan groups, and strongly linked to the need for social recognition. In Portugal, where the study reported here took place, surfing has a generally higher social-class image, since the initial investment in the board and suit, not to mention the mandatory fashion accessories, is quite significant. Therefore, surfing is considered by the majority of its fans as an adventurous and extravagant lifestyle, to which they may aspire in the hope of social recognition. Surfing also symbolizes some of the most socially acceptable of human qualities: courage, stamina, and the love of nature.

Accordingly, our third research proposition is:

RP3. Fans’ behaviour is influenced by the need for affiliation, as expressed in social recognition, socialization, and surfing symbolism.

The outcome of affiliation and socialization is generally some form of tribal behaviour. In the case of surfing fandom, one important way in which that manifests itself is the adoption of tribal brands, since neo-tribes commonly affirm their tribal nature through consumption. These postmodern communities, according to Maffesoli (1996), are inherently unstable, but can be held together by shared emotions, lifestyles, and consumption practices (Cova, 1997). Postmodern individuals do not see consumption and production as separate processes, according to Venkatesh et al. (1993), but instead show a clear propensity to act as co-producers and engage in what Rowley et al. (2007) call co-creation of products and brands. As Christensen et al. (2005) put it, consumption becomes production.

It is indeed possible to identify brands that are closely associated with surfing (and typically other sports with similar participant profiles, such as skateboarding and mountain biking), which form a part of the life and lifestyle of both surfers and fans. Our fourth research proposition is therefore:

RP4. Surfing tribalism confers on fans a propensity to prefer tribal brands at the following levels: knowledge of the surfing association, preference for tribal brands, preference for surf-related brands.

Methodology

The phenomenological nature of the study was well suited to a qualitative research design. The focus group method was judged appropriate for ideographic testing of the conceptual model. Enriched by computerised projective techniques (CPT) and
program-assisted design (PAD), it was judged better capable of capturing latent perceptions and attitudes that an extended period of data gathering episodes. The procedure would not be entirely devoid of quantification, however. Scale-based answers were included, with the aim of increasing the level of involvement when participants encountered the stimuli, and also of recording counts and frequency to facilitate content analysis. This purpose-designed combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques was expected to yield results that would permit the subsequent development of specific measurement scales and eventual statistical modelling. In short, the focus groups were a prelude to future studies but nevertheless fully capable of collecting rich data in their own right.

Two focus-group meetings were convened in April 2006, one attended by surfers (active participants in the sport) and the other by fans (teen followers who do not necessarily surf themselves). Participants were recruited on a surfing beach in Portugal, by means of a filter question relating to the nature of their involvement.

The surfer group consisted of six male participants and one female, aged between 21 and 27. The fans in the other group were nine males and one female, ranging in age from 16 to 28. At the end of the meetings, all the participants were offered a t-shirt from a well-known sports brand.

Agenda, metrics and data analysis
Owing to the phenomenological nature of the study, the protocol was developed in such a way as to reflect the analysis requirements. A wide range of subjects was included in the agenda, including personal characteristics, patterns of group behaviour, and inter- and intra-group relationships.

To assure the spontaneity of the answers and in order avoid restricting conversation, no one was present in the room besides the participants and the group moderator. The meetings were video-recorded, however, and the research team was in an adjacent room, overseeing the procedure and evaluating the group on a plasma-screen monitor. The moderator deployed a number tried and tested techniques for obtaining a high level of participation.

Computerised projective techniques
The conventional phase of each meeting was followed by a set of computerised projective technique exercises. Scott et al. (2000) attest to the scientific status of projective techniques. Bornstein (1999) explains the criteria for the validity of objective and projective dependency tests, and Cramer (1995) has studied the reliability of the closely related thematic apperception tests.

In this case, CPT was implemented by means of two PowerPoint slide sequences and a computer-linked data projector. Participants could thereby visualize the situations referred to in the discussion and place the non-directive questions in context. The slides related to the themes in the agenda are shown in Appendix 1. The speech-balloon method was also used in this phase, as shown in Appendix 2, to identify the personal characteristics of surfers and fans.

Program-assisted design
For the final phase of the meeting, each focus-group participant was provided with a laptop computer linked to a central server. This permitted them to express their
agreement level with a series of images relating to preferences between surfing and other leisure activities on a scale from 1 to 10 that was an integral part of the program. An example of one prompt and the answer scale is shown in Appendix 3. The aim was to identify and assess such central constructs as the level of participants’ commitment to surfing.

The focus group conversations were transcribed verbatim from video to paper. Content analysis followed the sequence of research questions and their constructs. Comparison between the narrative of the two groups and a summary assessment are shown in detail in Tables I–IV.

Findings

Cult and fandom

The main constructs associated with the cult and fandom concepts found in the analysis of the focus group transcripts and PAD responses are rituals, symbols, locations and beliefs, as shown in Table 1.

Surfers confirm existence of all these cult elements, except that, in the case of cult places (the beaches), truly “sacred” places are not consensual. As for the fans, the only relevant aspect is the surfing mode of dress, which allows them to pretend to be part of the surfing world. These findings reinforce the previous studies of Stevenson and Alau (2006) and Chun et al. (2003), as well as the view of Novak (1995). However, the findings also seem to exclude the fans group from the surfing community, since they do not have the profile of the tribe members, namely the feeling of cult towards the surf. On the other hand, the appeal to join this aspirational community seems to be through the wearing of branded garments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cult components</th>
<th>Fans</th>
<th>Surfers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Sacred places”</td>
<td>Non-existent</td>
<td>Special beaches with good waves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals</td>
<td>Non-existent</td>
<td>Analysis of the conditions before entering the water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preparing the equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolism</td>
<td>Sport-surf brands</td>
<td>Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Mode of dress</td>
<td>Respect for nature</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

RPI: Surfing is an activity which exhibits many of the manifestations of a religious cult

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only surfers recognise the “sacred places”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfers perform the rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both groups venerate special symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfers’ values are intrinsic; fans values are extrinsic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outcome: RPI is confirmed

Table 1

Cult and “fandom”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment: Proximity to the sport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fans: As an alternative to watching a surfing competition, would go to a concert, a party or stay with friends (but not to the cinema) Watching surfing not their preferred leisure time activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfers: Use their free time to go surfing, rather than to a concert or cinema Opinion divided on alternatively going to a birthday party or staying with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary assessment: Surfers much prefer surfing related activities at all times; fans do not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic profile: Both groups agree that fans are mostly teenagers, male and female, attracted by the surfing lifestyle as portrayed for example in a popular television series; surfers can be any age, but are mostly in their teens or 20s; older surfers are almost always men, and the younger mainly male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typological profile: Identify three types: Regular surfers Occasional surfers Non-surfers (only dress code)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify two types: Regular surfers Occasional surfers or non-surfers who want to look like regular surfers by dressing accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP2: Fans' distinctive behavioural patterns vary with the level of their commitment to the sport</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II: Commitment, demographics and typologies
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social recognition</th>
<th>Fans</th>
<th>Surfers</th>
<th>Summary assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surf fashion attracts fans; a neutral assessment</td>
<td>Surf fashion attracts fans; a negative assessment – they do not approve</td>
<td>Social recognition among surfers is achieved by physical and personality attributes</td>
<td>Social recognition among fans is conferred by mode of dress, a phenomenon disapproved of by surfers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize each other by the clothes they wear and the brands they use</td>
<td>Prefer comfortable clothing, not necessarily surf brands</td>
<td>The board for surfers, the clothes for fans</td>
<td>Social cohesion is especially strong among surfers, and revolves around surfing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolism</td>
<td>Brands associated with surfing</td>
<td>The surfboard, mainly symbolizing a lifestyle</td>
<td>The board for surfers, the clothes for fans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Some social activities in common beyond the surfing environment</td>
<td>Like to eat together after surfing; fewer non-surfing social activities in common</td>
<td>Social cohesion is especially strong among surfers, and revolves around surfing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans’ behaviour is influenced by the need for affiliation as expressed in (a) social recognition (b) socialization (c) surfing symbolism</td>
<td>Outcome: RP2 is strongly confirmed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, in the context of this study, these findings partially confirm RP1, which refers to the existence of a form of cult among surf lovers because surfers assume the existence of a surf cult while fans do not.

Commitment, demographic profile and typologies
The commitment concept was evaluated through open questions about the frequency with which the group members surfed and whether or not they attended surfing competitions. In addition, a PAD exercise investigated preferences between surf and other activities. The results are summarised in Table II.

As expected, surfers have a clear preference for surf activities, compared with fans, who are open to alternative activities. Both groups have the same view of surfer demographics: they think fans are mostly teenagers, both male and female, while surfers are older and mostly male.

All respondents recognize the existence of surf-lover typologies, which confirms RP2 and is consistent with Brody (1979). However, fans identify three categories (regular surfers, occasional surfers and non-surfers) while surfers recognise only two sub-groups of “surfer”. The implication is that the non-surfers, in other words the fans,
### Table IV. Associative behaviour and tribal brands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fans</th>
<th>Major opinions</th>
<th>Summary assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of association with brands</td>
<td>Some are aware of brand sponsorship at the level of the sports, but not at the level of individuals (non-tribal competitors)</td>
<td>Aware of all forms of brand sponsorship.</td>
<td>Very substantial awareness of brand associations through sponsorship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective preference for tribal-related brands</td>
<td>Tend not to differentiate between sponsors’ brands and those that simply using surfing images in their advertising. Both positively influence brand preference.</td>
<td>Prefer brands that sponsor surfing, and avoid those that simply using surfing images in their advertising.</td>
<td>Surfers prefer “real” surfing brands; fans are equally attracted to more loosely connected brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective preference for surf-related brands</td>
<td>Claim not to favour surfing brands in particular, except in clothing.</td>
<td>Associating mainstream brands (coffee, beer) with surfing can stimulate trial, unless they are high-ticket, high-involvement products.</td>
<td>Fans develop a preference for externalised symbols of surfing: clothing and accessories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( R^2 \%: \) Surfing tribesmen confer on fans a propensity to prefer tribal brands at the following levels:  
(a) knowledge of the surfing association;  
(b) preference for tribal brands;  
(c) preference for surf-related brands.

Table IV. Associative behaviour and tribal brands

may pretend to belong to the community but in fact do not, and cannot in the eyes of the surfers.

Interestingly, the fans were perfectly willing to accept occasional surfers and non-surfers as a valid sub-group of the surfing community as long as they wore the right clothing. This is consistent with the view taken by Cova (1987).

**Beliefs, behavioural patterns, affiliation and “S3”**

The main constructs associated with beliefs, behavioural patterns and affiliation found in the analysis of the focus group transcripts were the “S3” group: social recognition, socialisation and symbolism. The details are shown in Table III.
The main finding was that surfers begin surfing as teenagers and quickly develop set beliefs and values related to nature, sea and congenial relationships. Their behavioural pattern is quite strongly linked to the level of their involvement with surfing.

As suggested by Richardson (2004) and Donnelly and Young (1988), it was possible to identify different motivations among different sub-groups. Interestingly, the desire for social recognition seems to be stronger among the fans than among surfers, for they insist on the external signs of surfing lifestyle, such as clothes and accessories. Those are their symbols, not just the board or the wet suit.

Surfers evidently do not feel the need to externalise their association with surfing by means of their clothes. However, they do have a stronger level of affiliation, and accordingly take their board with them whenever they go to the beach, ritualise the act of scanning the sea for good surfing conditions, and are willing to decline other activities in favour of a good day in the surf. Fans do not have special beliefs about surfing; they just like the lifestyle. Once again, they are relegated to the out-group.

In social terms, surfers are positively valued by non-surfers. They recognize other surfers by their sun-tanned bodies and positive attitudes. Fans are recognized by the clothes and accessories they wear or use, since they value surf brands a great deal.

For surfers, the main symbol of surfing is the board. They go with other surfers in social groups to the beach and to the sea, but do not necessarily socialize in their daily life. As for fans, watching surfers is not their preferred hobby but just one of various aspects of general togetherness. Being generally younger than the surfers and often students, they have a more varied routine. However, they do wear surf-branded clothes, to display the lifestyle symbols wherever they are and thereby demonstrate their link with an aspirational group.

As Dewsnip et al. (2008) predict, the pursuit of arousal and materialism, related to the need for affiliation, positively influences the level of their identification with their chosen sport. RP2 is therefore confirmed.

Tribalism and tribal brands
Both groups were well aware of surf-sponsors' brands, and preferred the tribal brands, as shown in the summaries of focus group findings in Table IV.

Consistent with their active interest and involvement, the surfer group made a clear distinction between brands that sponsor surfing and others that do not but profit from the association with the sport in their advertising. They consider sponsor-brands to be legitimate supporters, a kind of "friendly" brand that does serve the community. As Covin (1997) puts it, they are "brands that serve the tribe, not brands who are being served by the tribe".

As expected, the fans showed no preference for sponsor brands. They prefer those with a well-recognised connection with surfing, but not necessarily a sponsoring relationship. The brands are simply the external symbols of a life style.

Since, the buying process is subject to a variety of stimuli and inputs, it was no surprise to find that the focus-group participants were not influenced by surf-related branding with respect to such high-involvement purchases as cars. In fact, most surfers are not yet financially independent enough to consider such major purchases, so their buying behaviour is effectively restricted to the surf-related impulses that are within their budget and in their comfort zone.
Given that awareness and preferences with respect to tribal brands are quite evident in the findings, but intention to buy is not, RP4a and RP4b are confirmed. RP4c is only partially supported, since it was only the surfers who favoured sponsors’ brands in particular, and they suspected the motives of other manufacturers using surfing themes and symbols in their marketing communications.

Conclusion and managerial implications
The surfing community can be considered a kind of tribe, on the grounds of the cult aspects of the sport, the performance of rituals, and the general feeling that some beaches are almost sacred places. As Prebish (1984) and Percy and Taylor (1991) suggest, cult and fandom are closely associated in the context of sports.

Confirming the research findings of Pimentel and Reynolds (2004), it was possible to identify distinct levels of fandom, especially among the fans, which would have an impact on the types of behavioural patterns. Different types of associative behaviour proved to be influenced by the intensity of affiliation through the desire for social recognition (Madrigal, 2002) and for the externalization of symbolism (Weiss, 2001) and also through the desire for socialization (Jacobson, 2003; Richardson, 2004).

Finally, when it comes to the acceptance of surf-related brands, surfers and non-surfers are distinctly different. The former do favour those which, in their view, benefit the sport and the surfing community, whereas the latter can be equally attracted to fashion brands that evoke the surfing lifestyle. However, despite their strong preference, the surfers unexpectedly showed no propensity to buy these branded products in all the categories. They are willing to drink coffee or beer brands that actively support surfing, would not necessarily prefer a car brand associated with the sport or the lifestyle. This findings reflect the inconvenient truth that awareness and preference do not always correspond in a predictable way to purchase intent, a challenge for marketing planners in markets as distinctive as the surfing community.

The findings show that different types of surfing fan develop distinct associative behaviour patterns, and consequently respond to surf-related brands differently. This reinforces the need for both manufacturers and retailers working with tribal brands to organize and manage their marketing intelligence according to the tribal perspective rather than following a traditional approach. Planners must look at the surfing community as a unique phenomenon, and differentiate their marketing strategy, especially branding and marketing communications, accordingly.

Most popular surf brands are increasing their sales to fans, but risk losing the custom of the surfers themselves because they do not wish to be lumped in with “pretend” surfers. Therefore, surf-related brands need to consider the creation of new clothing lines and alternative communication channels, to match the “real” surfers’ needs and expectations.

The surfing community seems to offer good market potential for consumer brands, since they are mostly low-involvement products and it is therefore easy to promote trial among a young audience. But advertisers who use surfing imagery in an unplanned way, as a general symbol of an appealing lifestyle, may recruit fans but run the risk of alienating surfers. This is a key marketing intelligence message for planners operating in that market sector.
Limitations and further research
The main limitations of this study are related to its restricted scope; one country, two types of consumer, 16 respondents. Its findings therefore cannot be generalized but may nevertheless be found indicative, and could be a sound basis for future research studies.

Further, research is in fact already projected at two different levels; application of the same qualitative approach to other sports, perhaps comparatively, and a quantitative extension of the methodology in order to be able to generalize the main qualitative conclusions.

Other studies might be conducted in countries where the surfing communities may well function in subtly different ways; elsewhere in Southern Europe, in South America, in Australia, or in Hawaii and California. They should take account of the growing popularity of surfing among the young, and the proliferation of surf schools. It is likely that the somewhat purist and exclusive attitudes and behaviour of the "real" surfers in our study will not remain the norm beyond the medium-term future.

References


Gardner, J. (1997), The Age of Extremism, Carol Publishing Group, Secaucus, NJ.


Further reading


Appendix 1

Surf tribal behaviour

Figure A1.
Examples of slides for the focus groups

Appendix 2

What are the characteristics of a regular surfer?

Figure A2.
Example of speech-balloon test
Appendix 3

For a day with fantastic waves, you:

2. would miss your best friend birthday party.

Figure A3
Example of PAD test.

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